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Draft report

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VI. Matters related to translation and interpretation

1. At its 519th meeting, on 4 September 2012, the Committee considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences concerning matters related to translation and interpretation (see A/67/127, paras. 51-64, and supplementary information, sect. VI).

2. According to the report, it was expected that the ability of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to attract and retain the services of freelance language professionals would very likely be enhanced with the coming into force on 1 July 2012 of a new agreement between the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) and the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), and the new agreement between CEB and the International Association of Conference Translators (AITC). The Department needed about 21 language competitive examinations to be held each year to replenish language rosters. However, the limited resources of the Examinations and Tests Section gave it a standing capacity to conduct only eight or nine such examinations annually. With support from the Department, 15 of the most urgently needed examinations would be conducted in 2012. So far, the Department has been able to keep pace with the unfolding demographic transition in the language services.

Discussion

3. Several delegations requested more information regarding the new agreements that had been negotiated between CEB and AIIC and between CEB and AITC, including the ways in which the conditions of employment offered to freelance staff had been aligned with those available to permanent staff and the expected impact thereof on the cost of language services. Details were also requested concerning the measures that were being taken to increase awareness of opportunities for employment in United Nations language services, in particular in sub-Saharan

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Africa, and to ensure that retiring staff were replaced. A precise account of the scope of the shortage of qualified language staff was also needed. Several delegations enquired whether contact had been established with organizations that promoted the official languages of the United Nations. One delegation was interested to know whether competitive examinations were managed at the global level or by duty station and whether there was a system to consistently assign the same interpretation teams to support the same bodies.

4. A representative of the Secretariat said that the new agreements negotiated with AIIC and AITC, which responded to a request from a mandate issued by the Office of Internal Oversight Services, would, inter alia, ensure that freelance staff would be remunerated at a rate equivalent to the P-4 level, receive a social security payment and travel under the conditions dictated by the hiring organization. Most importantly, effective 1 July 2012, the agreement with AIIC had closed the so-called "North American" gap created by the previous agreement, by which United Nations system organizations based in North America had paid interpreters considerably less than those based in other parts of the world. Although costs would likely increase for many organizations, owing in part to a non-regression clause, it was important to note that the agreement had improved the working conditions of short-term staff, which would attract larger numbers of qualified freelance interpreters to work for the United Nations system and had eliminated competition among organizations for such staff.

5. With regard to outreach and recruitment, the Department had worked closely with the Office of Human Resources Management to better plan the competitive examinations, which were coordinated at the global level. Memorandums of understanding had been signed with 21 universities, including the University of Nairobi, which would serve as a link to strengthen the training of language professionals at other African universities. The absence of dedicated resources to conduct outreach activities had limited the possibility of working with organizations that promoted official United Nations languages. However, a dedicated website on United Nations language service careers had been launched and a professional network was being developed with the European Commission, the European Union and other international organizations facing a similar crisis in recruiting qualified language staff.

6. There were some mechanisms in place to review the quality of the translation work done by external contractors. Standardized non-technical documents, such as job vacancy announcements, were sent for translation by agencies, while parliamentary documentation and other sensitive materials, requiring translations of the highest quality, were assigned to staff members. Contractual translation work should not be viewed as fungible with the translation work done in-house; similarly, determining the cost of in-house translation was complicated and any figures in that regard should be treated as nominal.

7. Consistently assigning the same team of interpreters to support the same bodies was referred to as "continuity" and was a factor taken into account to ensure that the interpretation was of high quality, although the complexity of scheduling interpretation teams made it impossible to always assign the same team to the same body. However, interpreters were prepared to handle diverse technical topics and had specialized knowledge on a range of subjects.